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THE PREACHABLENESS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The New Testament has always been the great storehouse of Christian inspiration and guidance. It has always been preached. If any question arises about its preachableness at the present time, there must be some reason for such question.

That reason is not unlike that which led to the very wide raising of a similar question concerning the Old Testament a generation ago, when George Adam Smith gave his Lyman Beecher Lectures on "Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament." It lies in certain changes that have come over our conception of the authority and the content of the New Testament teaching.

First, as to the authority of the New Testament: The change in our conception of this authority has set us free from one difficulty which preachers of an earlier generation experienced. So long as it was felt to be the duty of all Christian people to believe for themselves what could be clearly shown to be in the New Testament, preachers were compelled either to make their own teachings conform in all details to the New Testament teachings, or (what more commonly happened) to twist the New Testament to make it agree with their own beliefs.

For example, it has long been difficult for modern people, preachers or laymen, to think that diseases of any sort are or have

ever been caused by the presence of demons in people's bodies. Upon the older idea of the authority of the New Testament it was necessary either that preachers should believe that certain diseases were thus caused, or that there was a disease which of itself should be called "demoniacal possession," and to teach this to their people, or that they should show that no such idea was in the New Testament. Especially did they feel obliged to show that Jesus held no such conception, but that all acts and words of his that might lend countenance to such an idea were to be interpreted as mere accommodation on his part to ideas of his time which he did not share. Most of us no longer feel ourselves confronted with these alternatives. We feel perfectly free to say that demoniacal possession is a New Testament idea, and equally free to say that this idea does not correctly represent the facts. We are delivered from the dilemma of either believing it for ourselves or denying it in the New Testament.

A second illustration of the same thing is found in the doctrine of the atonement. How many preachers of an earlier generation—one thinks of Bushnell as a shining example—who had worked themselves out to a conception of the atonement that seemed to satisfy them and to meet the ethical and spiritual requirements of their generation, were then under the added necessity of showing that the apostle Paul agreed with them! Many of the Pauline statements concerning the death of Jesus, a good while ago became extremely hard to preach. On the surface and in their apparently plain meaning they did certainly sound "forensic" and "substitutionary," and had come into quite open conflict with growing Christian ideas of divine justice and forgiveness. Such being the case, the preacher had either to accept such doctrine of the atonement as seemed to be clearly taught in the New Testament—which in this case meant the Pauline epistles—and preach it whether it seemed to fit the mind of his generation or not, or he had to "interpret" the New Testament statements to suit his own conception. Either way it was difficult—difficult to make people retain ideas which had really been outgrown; difficult to make Paul a modern theologian. Intelligent and progressive preachers did the best they could with it, but it was a hard dilemma, from which we are happily set free.

A third illustration of the same thing may be seen in the eschatological field. A certain number of Christian preachers have always held to the belief in the speedy coming of the end of the world. They have based this belief upon the New Testament, the teachings of Paul, the predictions of the Apocalypse, and the apparently explicit utterances of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. Those preachers to whom such a belief, for their own generation, seemed impossible and absurd felt compelled to deny that the New Testament Christians entertained it. They "spiritualized" and explained the New Testament utterances that were capable of such treatment and ignored the rest. The preacher of today may frankly admit that the expectation of a speedy coming of the end of the world was characteristic of New Testament thought, and yet he himself may quite decline to hold any such expectation. This change in our conception of the authority of the New Testament is not only a great personal convenience to preachers who can neither accept nor preach all ideas found in the New Testament; it is also (and much more important) a great encouragement to honest New Testament study. One does not have to promise himself beforehand that he will find no results except such as he can personally agree with.

But though the decay of the older conception of the authority of the New Testament may be a relief to the preacher, it is sometimes also a difficulty for him. He may find his people confused by it and saying to themselves: "So long as everybody took the whole New Testament just as it stood, we knew what to believe. But in these days of private interpretations, when the Book does not mean what it seems to say, and one man's interpretation of it is as good as another's, we do not know." He will find men who feel that with the decay of the purely authoritative standard in the New Testament all reasonable certainty in religious faith has been lost. It thus becomes obvious to the preacher that if he is to preach the New Testament at all he must preach it in some larger, more comprehensive, and more fundamental way.

Secondly, this necessity is further forced upon the preacher by changes in our conception of the content of the New Testament teaching. If one's study of the New Testament reveals to him there only secondary and incidental ideas which he cannot

personally accept, no great difficulty is felt. But if, from a revision of his ideas as to the actual content of the New Testament, one begins to feel that the New Testament ideas with which he is at variance are more or less fundamental, then one's sense of difficulty becomes much more acute. To take an illustration already used, we do not believe in these days that diseases are caused by the indwelling of evil spirits. We do not even believe that they were so caused in New Testament times; but we admit that it was generally so believed by the New Testament folk. So far our personal divergence from a New Testament point of view gives us no trouble. But if we push the matter one step farther and ask, Did Jesus himself believe in demoniacal possession? we raise a much more serious question. Many readers of the New Testament may be able to persuade themselves that he did not. Many others will feel that he did. If he did, and if we do not, then not only are we at liberty to differ with Jesus, but we are obliged to conclude that he was mistaken.

This case in itself will hardly cause any serious perplexity. But it points the way to difficulty. The crux comes when we see in how many points and at what vital points the ideas of Jesus differed from those of modern Christians.

For the sake of argument I may put the matter hypothetically, but in its extreme form. Suppose, in the first place, that all the differences that have been alleged by modern scholars between the Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel be allowed. Suppose it be admitted that if Jesus spoke as he is represented as speaking in the Synoptics, he cannot have spoken as he is said to have done in the Fourth Gospel. Suppose, in consequence, that the utterances of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in the parabolic teaching of the Synoptics be taken to represent his real mode of teaching, but the long discourses in the fourteenth and succeeding chapters of John be regarded as unhistorical, that is, the early Christian idea of what Jesus might have said, not the accurate record of what he did say. Suppose, on the same basis, that the total picture of Jesus drawn in the Fourth Gospel cannot be harmonized or reconciled with that drawn of him in the Synoptics, and that intelligent readers of the New Testament must choose between the two.

Suppose, in the second place, that in many instances even in the Synoptics we have no means of being sure of the exact words of Jesus. Where Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Luke says, "Blessed are ye poor." Where Matthew says, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness," Luke says, "Blessed are ye that hunger now." In Matthew's conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that the man who hears his words and follows them is like one who builds his house upon the rock; whereas one who hears and follows them not, is like one who builds upon the sand. In reporting the same saying Luke represents Jesus as making no reference to different kinds of soil, but only to the fact that one man builds with a foundation and the other without one. In instances such as these, the words being reported in Matthew and Luke only, no comparison with Mark or John is possible. But in the only Gospels that report them the words are differently reported. If one will spend hours with a Greek lexicon he may be able to convince himself that he knows which of these forms of words really goes back to Jesus, but he will hardly convince anyone else, and in many instances he cannot even assure himself. Suppose, in other words, that in many instances, and sometimes where we are dealing with the most fundamental teachings of Jesus like those in the Sermon on the Mount, we find ourselves unable to be sure precisely what Jesus did say.

Suppose, in the third place, that even in the Synoptics one has to admit the insertion into the mouth of Jesus of some later ideas. If one should take, for instance, the little parable in Luke's eighteenth chapter, of the Unjust Judge, closing with the words, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find the faith in the earth," and should be convinced that these last words do not come from Jesus, that as a part of the parable they mean nothing, and are quite out of place in the mouth of Jesus while he was living and as yet did not even look forward to death. Suppose that one concludes that they come from Luke, who, after relating the parable and reflecting upon all the hardships and persecutions which the Christians of his day had to endure, wondered whether the new faith would live till the return of Jesus. Suppose one should carefully compare all the passages in the Synoptics in

which Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man," and should find that in practically every instance the phrase is either lacking in Matthew where it is present in Luke, or lacking in Luke where it is present in Matthew; or occurs in a verse that seriously interrupts the connection and may reasonably be suspected of being a gloss, or even in a verse which is lacking in the best manuscripts; or that the phrase is so used as to cause confusion in the persons of the verbs and pronouns, or even to lead to a sadly twisted sentence, as in Mark's story of the paralytic let down through the roof; or so as to render the context meaningless, as where Matthew, by inserting the phrase where Mark does not have it, makes Jesus answer his own question in asking it, "Who do men say that I the Son of Man am?" Suppose that for one reason or another the phrase is open to suspicion wherever one finds it, and in consequence one comes to feel that in all probability Jesus did not call himself the Son of Man, but that the title is a messianic one that was developed after the death of Jesus, and was then read back into his mouth by the writers of our Synoptic Gospels or by the community to which they belonged.

Or, to put the most extreme case, suppose it to be true, as many New Testament scholars are these days maintaining, that Jesus did expect the end of the world either during his own lifetime, or at least during that of the generation to which he belonged. The Pauline epistles are certainly full of this expectation. The Synoptic Gospels in more than one place carry back this idea into the mind of Jesus and make him predict in so many explicit words his own parousia. Not only are such words found in "the Little Apocalypse," where they might be explained as part of a document not originally Christian, but very explicitly, when he sent out the Twelve, Jesus explained to them that they were not to go outside the cities of Judah, because there would not be time "before the Son of Man should be come." In other passages in all three Synoptics he is represented as warning his hearers to be on their guard, since they know not the day nor the hour when the Son of Man shall come; "there are some of you standing here," he said, "who shall not taste of death till all these things be fulfilled." It is possible, of course, to remove all these ideas from the mind

of Jesus by attributing them to a later time, as suggested above. If one does this, the difficulty of preaching these utterances, and of explaining to a congregation of Christian worshipers that Jesus did not really say such things, but that they were later ideas read back into his mind by the evangelists, is certainly not a slight one. Moreover, if this alternative be taken, and it be concluded that none of these sayings go back to Jesus; if, on the contrary, he entertained concerning the end of the world and his own parousia quite the opposite opinion, then one must explain not only how such explicit utterances, so contrary to his real expectation, became so confidently attributed to Jesus, and why no word of his was preserved expressing the opinion which he actually held; but one must also explain why there are so many of the ethical teachings of Jesus that seem to fit exactly this expectation of the quick coming of the end. For it is the contention of some New Testament scholars that this expectation was not only clearly expressed by Jesus on various occasions, but that it colored much of his ethical teaching, and has made some of that teaching at least inapplicable to the modern world. "Take no thought for the morrow"; "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth"; "If anyone will take away thy cloak, let him have thy coat also"; "Resist not the evil man"; have not men who expected the end of the world always talked in this way? Except in the case of Jesus, has not their expectation been recognized as vitiating their moral maxims? And does not this expectation, in the mind of Jesus, explain that unworldliness, or other-worldliness, that disregard of property and progress, and even of some of the sacred ties and relations of life which are found in some of the teachings of Jesus? Upon the eschatological hypothesis Jesus' advice to the young man to sell all he had and give it away in alms, or to the other young man to let the dead bury their dead, or his more general statement that no one could be his follower who did not hate his own father and mother, is quite natural and proper. If the end is coming so soon, this is the way one would naturally feel about all merely earthly matters. But why (so it is asked) should we try to enforce upon a world which is to continue, a system of ethics devised for a world which was to pass away?

I have put all this in a hypothetical way. I do not care to argue strongly for all the suppositions I have made. Yet I have made none except such as are now earnestly supported by a considerable body of New Testament scholars. Unless all these suppositions are false, there is certainly some basis for raising the question about "the preachableness of the New Testament." What is now to be said to that question?

If it be asked, as a preliminary question, whether, under the circumstances, it would not be better to preach general moral and religious truth, to fall back upon principles universally accepted, and to apply those principles with all possible earnestness to our modern life, but to let the New Testament alone, I reply that it would not be better. It would be decidedly worse. The New Testament is the great textbook of the Christian religion. Many of its principles may be found stated in other sacred literatures. All of them, I suppose, are written in the human heart. But it is not enough that Christian people should be filled with sentiment actually Christian and animated by admittedly Christian principles of conduct. It is further necessary, if Christianity is to be an intelligent and virile force, and is not to degenerate into mere moralism, that this great textbook of Christianity should be constantly studied, explained, and taught from the pulpit—its obscurities cleared up, its principles differentiated from the mere generalities of the moral life, and all that is distinctive of it kept living and clear before the Christian people. A Christian church which is ignorant of the New Testament, which is permitted to regard it as antiquated and superfluous, even though to that church much of the moral and religious substance of the New Testament should have been preached, would be in every way far below a church educated upon the New Testament.

Among general considerations, also, the preacher may well urge the fact which people are so slow to see and so quick to forget, that Christianity did not grow out of the New Testament, but the New Testament out of Christianity. Only after Jesus had lived and died, only after the first church had been gathered in Jerusalem, and many missionaries from it had carried the new gospel into many lands, only after Paul had transferred Christianity from Asia

Minor to Southern Europe, and had taken it out of a decaying civilization and planted it firmly in the great centers of the ongoing Greco-Roman culture—only then did the New Testament arise. There was Christianity before the New Testament was written.

He may also well urge the other fact that religious authority, to anyone who stops to think the matter through, can never rest in any book, New Testament, gospel, or any other, nor even in the words of Jesus, but in the soul of the believer. Even if one attributes a unique and final authority to the New Testament, he can do so only by the appeal to his own mind. It is his own mind that decides the matter, and therefore his own mind that is the ultimate authority, even though his own mind may posit authority in something, book or other, outside itself. God has no way of speaking except through the human soul. Whatever is in the New Testament is there because it was at an earlier time in the soul of some man. The only religious authority is a spiritual authority. If the newer ideas about the New Testament help to drive home this all-important truth, they will have accomplished one great spiritual benefit.

It may also be maintained that considerations against the validity of some of the words attributed to Jesus, and all other results of New Testament criticism, leave the moral principles enunciated in the New Testament quite untouched. The Golden Rule is just as true for a world which is to continue indefinitely as for a world whose end is momentarily expected. The story of the Prodigal Son is as attractive a picture of God's attitude toward men upon one hypothesis as upon another. Whatever may have been the exact words of Jesus, and however much was or was not read back into his mouth from a later time, it is still true, and equally true, that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth. What Jesus held or did not hold about medical and scientific matters, or even about his own parousia, does not affect the fact that he that exalteth himself shall be abased, but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Whatever content Jesus put into the phrase the "Kingdom of God," whether he looked forward to a speedy establishment of that kingdom by the divine intervention, as his forefathers and contemporaries did, or anticipated its

slow coming through the centuries by the operation of natural spiritual laws as we do, it is still true, as Jesus said, that in that kingdom he that would be first must be servant of all. Whatever was Jesus' indebtedness to the thought of his own time, in these or in any other items, no single piece of human literature of the same compass contains one-tenth the spiritual insight and the permanent religious truth to be found in the Sermon on the Mount. The story of the Prodigal Son is *true*—true to human nature, true to the spiritual instincts and needs of man—upon one hypothesis as upon any other. These things are not merely "preachable," they are the substance of all good preaching.

If it be said, on the other hand, that this is not quite true of some of the other teachings of Jesus, which are suspected of having been much influenced by his eschatological expectation, such as the teaching about non-resistance, the exhortation not to take thought for the things of tomorrow, or the advice not to lay up treasures upon earth, it should be frankly replied that some of these teachings have never been very preachable. They are as much so now as they ever have been. But it has always been necessary, in preaching these maxims of Jesus, to explain that they did not mean precisely what they said; to regard them as idealistic utterances, "counsels of perfection," too high to be attained by ordinary Christians—as a far-off ideal to be approximated, in the life of the world or of the individual, only slowly and imperfectly. If one is convinced that some of these teachings did come from Jesus' eschatological hope, which we no longer share, this will not make these teachings any less or any more "preachable" than they have always been; it may permit the preacher to leave on one side some of these exhortations without a sense of disloyalty to Jesus or to the New Testament.

These more general considerations may show that the New Testament is preachable in spite of all changes in our conception of its authority and its content. Such a result would be only negative. Far more important, however, are the positive advantages in the preaching of the New Testament which those changes have made possible.

First, one can now preach the New Testament in the historic spirit. If he preaches about some scene in the life of Jesus which involves the healing of a man possessed with demons, he may not merely admit that Jesus probably believed in these demons though we do not; he can show why people in Jesus' day naturally and necessarily believed in them. Instead of permitting his people to regard the whole belief in Jesus' time as a mere piece of superstition, as the crude rationalism of a few years ago declared it, he can show the historical necessity of it and its place in the total of first-century spiritual conceptions. Without committing himself to Pauline conceptions of the atonement, and without explaining away the things that Paul tried to insist upon, he can show how and why these conceptions arose in the mind of the apostle, how inevitable they were in his time, and how absurd it would be to demand of him that he should hold our modern ideas.

Secondly, he can show, as consequent upon this same historic point of view, how the Christian ideal is not to be entirely identified with any or all of the utterances of the New Testament, but has grown ever since the first century and is still growing. Some elements of the modern Christian ideal, such as the emphasis upon one's service of the world by his daily work, or the ambition for discovering and proclaiming the truth, may be practically absent from the New Testament, or passed over in that book as merely incidental and unimportant. They are nevertheless a very vital part of the modern Christian ideal. In the same way some items may be overemphasized in the New Testament, as, for example, the item of self-sacrifice compared with the item of self-realization. The point is that the Christian ideal is forever growing. It is not to be identified with the ideal of the New Testament times. If it can be shown that the New Testament people were "world-despisers," we are none the less Christian because we are not. If it can be shown that the New Testament emphasis upon the intellectual and artistic sides of life is extremely slight, that emphasis is none the less a part of the Christian ideal of today. Here, as elsewhere, the New Testament is not the end but the starting-point.

Thirdly, as already implied, this newer attitude toward the New Testament permits the preacher to preach not merely on isolated texts of that book, but much more than ever before, and in a larger and more comprehensive way, upon the literature itself. People can now be interested in the growth of that great literature, in discussions about how it came into being, what portions of it are older and what more recent. They can be made to appreciate the differences between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel and to see the growth in Christian thought revealed in those differences. They can be shown the earliest form of the Christian tradition as it appears in Mark and be made to appreciate the additions to that tradition made by Matthew and Luke. They can be taken into the secret of how the sayings of Jesus were first recorded and how they now come to be combined by the later evangelists with the outline of the life of Jesus as told by Mark. All this can be done, not in the technical and purely scientific manner of the theological classroom, but in a way to show intelligent Christian laymen that the New Testament literature grew out of a great seething movement of Christian thought and to reveal to them the living spirit behind and beneath the process which gave that literature to the world. The New Testament as a whole and as a literature unique in the spiritual history of the race is much more preachable now than for many years.

Fourthly, the modern preacher can show that, if the older idea of the authority of the New Testament has decayed, there is a larger sense in which the New Testament carries a spiritual compulsion into the soul of every man who is acquainted with it. Granting that religious authority is in the soul of man, and of every particular man, yet wherever one opens the New Testament, whether he goes to the words of Jesus or considers the assemblies of men to whom Paul wrote his letters, everywhere throughout the New Testament the reader will feel himself in the presence of a life lived in the pursuit of certain well-defined ideals. The ideal of faith, of quietness, of an absolute trust in God, of patience, of peace, of unworldliness, of personal purity, of service for others—the ideal of military glory has not more truly moved Germany for the last thirty years than these ideals ruled the life of the New

Testament people. These ideals are not affected by biblical criticism. But on the other hand, in the New Testament they are not merely ideals; they are ideals vitalized, in process of realization, working mightily in the heart of a whole generation, and issuing in a movement unique among the spiritual movements of history. The weakness of moralism is its abstraction. The strength of religion is its concreteness. It is not difficult to find great ideals stated in beautiful words in many ancient religious literatures or in much modern literature. But the thing that stirs the hearts of Christian men and women, that takes all this idealism out of the realm of the intellectual and the doctrinaire, and makes it living and powerful, is the picture of that time when in one particular part of the world, under the immediate influence of Jesus and his own generation, and under conditions less complicated than those that have since come upon Christendom, these ideals can be seen working and controlling and actually embodied in the life of a community of believers. All this would be lost if the New Testament were not studied and preached, even though the separate items of the New Testament ideal should be enforced from the pulpit. The New Testament is the great fountain of spiritual religion. Its inspiration for our own time, or for any and all other times, is not affected by changes of opinion concerning its authority or content; it lies in the character of the Christian movement. And that Christian movement is described for us in the New Testament and nowhere else. It is not merely preachable. It is the most preachable of all things. Nor was there ever a time in the history of Christendom, despite all our progress, which stood in more danger of forgetting or ignoring precisely those ideals by which the New Testament people lived than just this age of ours. It is just now the time of all times to preach the New Testament.

Finally, there is the sublime figure of Jesus, theme of the world's best preaching in all the ages—is he still preachable? Yes; more and more so with every generation, though not always in the same identical way, to be sure. Modes of preaching Jesus have changed more than once. Lecturing at one time from the text "I determined to know nothing among you save Christ and him crucified," Professor Park maintained that the preacher had no particular

concern with anything in the life of Jesus except his death; that was the one thing which he was continually to preach; which meant, of course, that he was to confine his preaching practically to Professor Park's theory of the atonement! For the purpose of many preachers, not many years ago, it would not have made much difference what Jesus said, how he lived, how he treated various classes of men and women, what ideals he cherished, and how the life of his own spirit ran, only so he had died on the cross. It is the advantage of the newer studies in the New Testament that, even when they are more or less radical and require many modifications of preconceived ideas, they do yet make the apostolic generation and the figure of Jesus living and real. Most Christian preachers are now preaching, not merely the death of Jesus, but the ideals by which he lived, the great purposes which animated him, the circumstances of his life and death, and all that went to make **him** the supreme character of human history. Whatever helps us to make all this real to ourselves and our people is certainly a contribution to the preachableness of the New Testament.